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ON ROYAL GARDENS IN MESOPOTAMIA

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In memoriam Erich Schmidt

THE Book of Esther contains considerable information about the complex of buildings and the arrangement of courts and gates that constitute the palace of an Oriental potentate at the end of the first millennium B.C. We learn that there was in Susa a "Gate of the King" (2:19), and an "Outer" (6:4) as well as an "Inner Court" (4:11) of the palace which is called the "King's House" (*bêt hammelek*). The same term also refers to the royal chambers (2:13), whereas *bêt hammalkût* denotes the residence of the queen (1:19 and 2:16). Two other establishments are mentioned: the "House of the Women" (2:9), which is provided with a court (2:11) and is supervised by an official with the title "Keeper of the Women," and what is called the "Second House of the Women" (2:14), where the royal concubines, entrusted to the care of the king's chamberlain, lived.

While we remain in the dark about the details of the layout, the text makes it clear that degrees of accessibility determined the arrangement of the palace complex. From the King's Gate, which separates the ruler from those of his subjects who have not been granted admission (2:21), to the Inner Court (whose sanctuary-like inaccessibility is tellingly described by Esther in 4:11) we find an ever-increasing exclusion of the outside world. Thus, while Mordecai could observe Esther from the court of the House of the Women (2:11), an intermediary had to be used to exchange messages between him and Esther when the latter was moved to the queen's residence (4:4 f.).

In the course of the story we are led to another part of the royal palace, to a building called *bîtan*. It is mentioned twice and in each case as the place in which a feast is arranged, in fact, a *symposion*. In both instances (1:5 and 7:8) the events that take place in the *bîtan* are dramatic and essential to the story: not only is the entire chain of events initiated by the king's order given in the *bîtan* to Queen Vashti, but also the climax of the story, the confrontation of Haman by Esther, takes place in the same building. Each time we find the word in the phrase *ginnat bîtan hammelek*, "garden of the *bîtan* of the king." It should be noted that the public feast (1:5) is given in the court of the garden of the *bîtan* while the private affair in which only the protagonists participate seems to have been arranged in the *bîtan* itself. This is shown when the king, leaving the feast angrily, goes "into the garden of the *bîtan* of the king" (7:7) and returns there (7:8) to find the unfortunate Haman on the queen's couch.

Ever since the Septuagint, *bîtan* has been translated by "house," and when the Akkadian word *bîtānu* appeared in an Esarhaddon text¹ (see below), it was connected with the word *bîtan*, and the translation "palace" was accepted.

There are two uses of the word *bîtānu* in Akkadian apart from the well-attested meaning "inside (of an object or a house), interior (of a country)." One use of the word refers to the personnel of a palace organization or a temple who are stationed, who work, and who are provided for inside the compound; this distinguishes them from persons referred to

¹ For literature on *bîtānu*, cf. simply Borger *Esarh.* p. 62 f., note to Ep. B 32.

by *bābānu*, “outside.” This usage is attested in middle Babylonian texts from Nippur and in neo-Babylonian texts from Sippar, etc.; for references see *AHw.* and *CAD* sub *bitānu*. The palace population or the members of the temple organization characterized as belonging to and constituting the *bitānu* are under the responsibility of officials appropriately called *ša bitāni*, *ša pan bitāni*, or *ša muḫḫi bitāni*. In the other use, *bitānu* seems to denote a special building within a palace or a temple; it is restricted to texts of the neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian periods.

The references to a specific building called *bitānu* appear mainly in the inscriptions of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. There is an inscribed brick (*KAH*, I, 49 = *OIP*, II, 151, No. xv) from a *bitānu* (wr. É-a-nu-u) which Sennacherib erected in Assur for his ill-fated son Aššur-nādin-šumi, and two stone slabs belonging to another É-an-nu-ú or É-a-na built by the same king for the god Assur in the same city. One of these inscriptions on stone is quite short and terse (*KAH*, I, 44 = *OIP*, II, 151, No. xi), but the other (*KAH*, I, 43 = *OIP*, II, 150, No. x) tells that the building was erected for the god on behalf of the king’s younger son, *ša ina šēpē* ⁴*Aššur ibbanú*,² as the text adds in a mysterious aside. While these standardized inscriptions do not shed any light on the nature of the building, one might draw attention to two instances in which a building called É.GAL.TUR.RA (lit. “small palace”) is mentioned as likewise belonging to the crown prince. They both date from the time of Esarhaddon. From the first inscription (R. Campbell Thompson *Iraq*, VII, 96f., No. 11 = Borger *Esarh.* § 30) we learn that Esarhaddon himself, as crown prince (bearing the name Aššur-etel-ilāni-mukin-apli), lived in an É.GAL.TUR.RA. In the second inscription (*MAOG*, 3/1–2, 22f. = Borger *Esarh.* § 43) we read that while Assurbanipal was heir apparent (*mār šarri rabū ša bīt rēdūti*), and in the very year in which the oath of loyalty to him was administered to the officials of the realm, Esarhaddon decided to enlarge the É.GAL.TUR.RA of the crown prince which was in the city of Tarbiš. The king adds that this enlargement was made for Assurbanipal’s personal convenience (*ana multa’ūti PN*).³

The Nineveh prisms of Esarhaddon are extant in many copies and have been assembled, transliterated, and translated by R. Borger, “Die Inschriften Asarhaddons Königs von Assyrien” (= *Afo*, Beiheft 9) under § 27. They tell of the building activities in the extensive palace complex (*ekallāte rabbāte*) in Nineveh and refer to a *bitānu* that was part of the palace complex. Since the text contains the most explicit indication available of the nature and the size of such a building, the report deserves some attention.

This is the order in which the features of the new palace in Nineveh (Borger *op. cit.*, p. 61 f., Ep. 22, lines 1–34) are listed: the É-tan-ni (with the important variant É.LUGAL), i.e., the *bitānu*, then the palace complex as such, described quite typically as regards material used for roofs and doors, elaborate figural decorations, etc. (lines 9–29), the garden planted around it (called *kirimāḫu*, for which see below), and an installation which is alluded to only in a few general terms and seems to have been intended as the barracks of the king’s bodyguard. Esarhaddon refers to this safety measure by saying simply that he had enlarged the yard (*kisallu*), made an access ramp leading up to the terrace which harbored the entire palace, and provided a constant supply of water for

² Though the phrase can, literally, be translated by “who was begotten at the feet of the Aššur image,” its real meaning remains obscure.

³ As to the *bitānu* of the god Aššur built by Sennacherib, one could think of an installation comparable

in function to the *bitānu* built by Esarhaddon himself (see p. 5). The Assyrian gods are made to live very much like the king, for which see the letter *ABL* 366 discussed on p. 333.

the horses, meaning those of the chariotry and cavalry stationed at the palace (lines 32–34).

It is evident that the king put the stress on the first-mentioned building, the *bitānu*, probably because it constituted in some way a novelty in Assyrian palace architecture. He boasts with reference to the *bitānu*, “I did what no king before me had done,” a unique statement in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon. A further indication comes from the numerical specifications that are given for the *bitānu* rather than for the entire palace or its terrace as is customary in texts of this type. The dimensions of the *bitānu*—95 × 31 large cubits at 0.50 m. each—are revealing inasmuch as they are small for a royal Assyrian palace but must have been considered extraordinarily large for a building of the *bitānu* type and are for this reason expressly mentioned. This leads one to the conclusion that the *bitānu* was by definition a small building, as is also suggested by the expression É.GAL.TUR.RA, which appears in contexts similar to those in which *bitānu* occurs (see above).

To sum up the meager evidence: the term *bitānu* denotes a small building used for certain prestige purposes, in fact reserved for royalty (note the variant *bīt šarri* in the Esarhaddon text), such as the kings and the heirs apparent of the last Sargonids.⁴ It does not seem to have served normally as a residence.

Before we attempt to link the Akkadian evidence for the word *bitānu* with that for the Hebrew *bītān* of the Book of Esther, other occurrences of the word in contemporary texts should be surveyed. Outside of the discussed royal inscriptions, *bitānu* occurs only very rarely. In fact, the passage *ina pan É-tan-ni ina pan É.KI.NÁ.MEŠ É.LUGAL*, “in front of the *bitānu* (and) in front of the sleeping quarters of the royal residence” (*ABL*, 22, r. 5), represents the only instance in which *bitānu* is used as a designation of a building in royal use. Possibly, the damaged text *ADD*, 1083 ii 10 may belong here because *É-a-ni* occurs there beside *bīt māšarte* and *bīt rēdūti*. The Middle Assyrian references to an *asū ša bētāni* (*Afo*, XVII, 274:49), “physician of the inner quarter,” show that *bitānu* was also used as a designation of an inaccessible section of the palace, in this case the harem of the Assyrian kings, which as such was centrally located. This also fits in certain passages of the Harper letters, such as *ABL*, 84, r. 2 and 769:5 (*dajālija ša É-a-ni*), while *bitānu* appears to denote an interior section of a temple in the small neo-Babylonian ritual tablet, Pinches Berens No. 110:6 and 9.

Though it is difficult to disentangle homonymous expressions in the not-too-diversified contexts in which *bitānu* is attested, I propose to assume two homonyms for each of which a number of unequivocal attestations are available, although a small group remains which cannot be definitely assigned. The two homonyms are, first, the Akkadian *bitānu*, “interior, inside, inner quarter, etc.” in a noun formation which corresponds to *bābānu* or *kidānu* for “outside,” and another word *bitānu* as the designation of a small luxury structure, an independent architectural unit for the use of the king or the heir apparent. The latter I would interpret as a West Semitic loan in Akkadian from *bitōn* formed from *bīt*, “house,” by means of the diminutive suffix *-ōn*,⁵ and translate it there-

⁴ It is possible that a symbolic-architectural difference existed between the palace of an Assyrian king and that of the crown prince (É.GAL versus É.GAL.TUR.RA and *bitānu*) and that the unprecedented act of Esarhaddon consisted in having a structure for princes incorporated in his royal palace.

⁵ For the typically Hebrew and Aramaic (not Akkadian) diminutive suffix *-ōn*, cf. J. Barth, *Die*

Nominalbildung in den semitischen Sprachen, p. 348 § 212 b and c. The word seems to be troublesome for the Hebrew grammarians; Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 318 n. 1, rejects it as “foreign,” Bauer and Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache*, pp. 498 ff., omits *bitan* and so does Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar* (2d ed. by A. E. Cowley), according to its Index of Hebrew Words and Forms.

fore by "small house," which fits what has just been said about the *bitānu* built by Esarhaddon, and about the corresponding Sumerogram É.GAL.TUR.RA.

The assumption that the Assyrian kings introduced architectural innovations from the West has an excellent precedent in the adoption of the western *bit ḫilāni* type of building by the Assyrian kings beginning more than half a century earlier. It demonstrates that the West was well able to influence the development of Assyrian palace architecture in the period in which the building type called *bitōn* was imitated in Assyria. The nature and function of the *bitānu* becomes clearer when one finds that, in about the same period, that of the Sargonids, another new architectural element enters into the style of royal living. This is the garden connected with the palace. The fact that a new term had to be used in Assyrian to refer to such an installation shows that it was novel and of foreign origin: the artificial Sumerian loanword *kirimāḫu*, which first appears in Sargon II's inscriptions, indicates the new royal fashion of setting out gardens in or beside royal residences. It is true that in Assyrian royal inscriptions the king's concern for gardens and horticulture is evident ever since Tiglath Pileser I; it is expressed in the collecting of foreign plants and trees, the establishing of gardens outside the capital, etc.⁶ It is, however, important to note that, with the Sargonids, the royal interest in gardens definitely shifts from utilitarian to display purposes, from an interest in assembling the largest possible variety of specimens to incorporating a garden into the palace precinct for the personal pleasure of the king. This change is expressed in the replacement of the ancient term for garden, *kirú*, by *kirimāḫu*.

In the framework of this development, the inclusion of a *bitānu*, "little house," in the architecture of an Assyrian palace complex fits perfectly when we assume that it denotes a "kiosk" or "summerhouse." This means that the garden together with the garden kiosk have become an essential feature of the palace of Assyrian kings beginning with the Sargonids. They both were taken over from the West, as was the portico-decorated building, the *bit ḫilāni*.

Before we investigate this phenomenon in more detail, it should be noted that the proposed meaning of the West Semitic loanword *bitānu* likewise fits in the passages where the Hebrew (or Aramaic loanword in Hebrew) *bitan* occurs in the Book of Esther.⁷ While the citizens of Susa are given a feast by King Ahasverus "in the court of the garden of the royal kiosk," he himself has a *symposion* with the queen and Haman in this kiosk. The ease with which the king leaves the table for the garden and re-enters the

⁶ The interest of Tiglath-Pileser I in gardens is clearly utilitarian and directed towards the "orchards in my country" and the "orchards of Assyria" (AKA 91 vii 23 and 26); also, Aššurnāširpal (AKA 147 v 23 and 185 r. 15, also *Iraq*, XIV 33:38 ff.) is interested in horticulture for the sake of his subjects.

For a garden comparable in purpose and perhaps also in time with the *kirú*-gardens of the Assyrian kings before the West exercised its influence, see the description in the *Odyssey* (VII 112 ff.) of the garden of Alcinoos.

For a garden as a sacred locality, note the unique inscription of Ibiq-Ištar of Malgium, VAS 1 32. Attention should perhaps be drawn to the desirability of a systematic study of the garden in Mesopotamian economics, poetry and religion. See W. Andrae, "Der kultische Garten," in *WO* I (1952) 485 ff.

⁷ The O. T. commentaries I have consulted do not seem to pay any special attention to the word *bitan* (see, however, next footnote). Von Soden, however, proposes a novel interpretation in *AHw*, p. 131 b by translating *ginnat bitan* with "Innengarten," assuming an Akkadian loan into Hebrew of a word *bitānu*, "inside, interior." This is difficult to accept for two reasons: (1) the Book of Esther uses the contrast *pe'niṣit* and *ḫiṣōna* for "inner" and "outer (court)," and it is therefore not likely that any need was felt to borrow a rare Akkadian term (via Aramaic) to create another word for "inner"; (2) the contexts in which *bitan* occurs (see above, p. 2) do not fit the proposed interpretation.

scene of the drama is perhaps best explained by our assumption that the *bītan* is an open structure, probably a colonnaded open hall.⁸

This leads us to an intriguing problem connected with the hypothesis proposed here, that of the physical features of the kiosk. I think we are fortunate enough to have an actual representation of such a building or of a structure of similar function on a stone relief from the palace of Assurbanipal in Nineveh. In the upper part there is a colonnaded low structure and a tree-lined aqueduct, while a park-like garden with small watercourses, paths, and many trees extends into the foreground, giving the impression of a summerhouse or gazebo overlooking a park; see simply R. D. Barnett and W. Forman, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs* (London, no date), No. 135. Archeological evidence for such pavilions comes from the park of the Persian king in Pasargadae for which I refer to E. Herzfeld, *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, I, 10, and to E. Schmidt, *Persepolis*, I, Pls. 21 and 24, Fig. 3.⁹ Such a kiosk may well have been a permanent feature of sophisticated palace architecture and may also have graced the garden of the Achaemenian palace in Susa.

Another problem arises in this connection in the nature of the garden introduced in Assyrian royal residences at that time. While we may assume that earlier royal gardens in Assyria had a purely utilitarian arrangement, two possibilities have to be envisaged for the later palace gardens: that of a formal, ornamental garden, and that of a landscaped garden. The former is well attested in Egypt, where it appears quite early.¹⁰ Also, the peristyle garden which is characteristic of the civilizations on the shores of the Mediterranean wherever an atrium-type house is found, suggests and favors a symmetrical and centered arrangement of flowers, trees, etc. If the garden and its kiosk came to Assyria from the West as has been surmised above, one would expect that such was the style of the royal pleasure garden. This, however, does not seem to have been the case. The gardens of the Assyrian kings seem to have been so arranged as to imitate a wooded and hilly terrain with paths and watercourses. I base my theory first on the descriptive phrase *tamšil Hamāni*, "in the likeness of the Amanus mountains," which the scribes like to use in reference to these royal gardens, and second on the actual representation of such a garden (*cf.* above). As an illustration only and by no means as evidence bearing directly on the problem at hand, one could quote Berossus when he says (*apud* Josephus *Ant.*, X, 11, 2) that Nebuchadnezzar erected hills of stones beside his palace in Babylon, which looked like natural mountains and were planted with all kinds of trees, quite apart from the "hanging gardens" alleged to have been built to give his mountain-born queen an illusion of her native surroundings.¹¹

The very existence of a landscaped garden in the first centuries of the first millennium B.C. in Assyria creates interesting problems of cross-cultural relations throughout Asia

⁸ The problem pertaining to the architectural features of the *bīānu* and the *bītan* as suggested by the above-mentioned representation of one-storied colonnaded buildings and their relation to the two-storied *hīlāni* type of building, which repeatedly has been the topic of investigations by philologists and art historians alike, cannot be dealt with in the present context. As early as in the *Journal des études juives* 1888 (16) *Actes* p. CCLXXVII, Dieulafoy suggested, however, that the *bītan* of the Book of Esther corresponded to the characteristically royal building called in Persian *appadan*, and this idea is not at all fantastic

if one realizes that the *appadan* functions as a monumental *belvedere* rather than as a storehouse which the etymology of its designation (R. G. Kent, *Old Persian Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, p. 168 a) seems to suggest.

⁹ I have to thank Dr. M. van Loon for drawing my attention to the cited passages.

¹⁰ Cf. simply A. Erman (neu bearbeitet von Hermann Ranke), *Aegypten und ägyptisches Leben im Altertum* (Tübingen, 1923) p. 203 ff.

¹¹ For this and similar passages, see R. Koldewey, *Das wiedererstehende Babylon* (Leipzig, 1914), p. 95 ff.

Major which cannot be discussed here. I would like to offer instead a suggestion concerning the origin of this particular style of garden within Assyria proper, as against the western, formal, style in garden layout. The palace gardens with their kiosks could well have been small-scale imitations of the out-of-town installations referred to with the foreign word *ambassu*,¹² which likewise begin to be mentioned in our period. Wild animals were kept in the *ambassu* for hunting, and it was also planted with fruit trees of all kinds, imported olive trees, and foreign spice plants (see Sennacherib's description in *OIP*, II, 113, viii, 17 ff., and also *ibid.*, p. 80:20 ff.). This unique combination of botanical garden and game park was furthermore related in some way to certain cultic or at least ceremonial activities for which the term "hunting" should be applied only *faute de mieux*. So we read in the letter *ABL*, 366 that the god Nabû "goes" into the *ambassu* to "kill" wild bulls. There are other references in Assyrian texts to ceremonial hunting by kings,¹³ though it is not clearly indicated whether this takes place in the open country or in game parks. There is no need to discuss this in the present context; my point here is solely to suggest that this was the background which may have inspired the landscaped royal palace gardens and to stress that such gardens do not express any sentimental and romantic attachment to nature as was the mainspring of the development of the same type of garden in Europe in the eighteenth century.¹⁴

¹² For *ambassu*, cf. simply *AHw.* 42 b.

¹³ On the hunt and hunting in Mesopotamia, there is still nothing more up to date than B. Meissner's "Assyrische Jagden" (= *Der Alte Orient* XIII [1911]), although the iconographic and epigraphic material would certainly warrant a new study on this subject.

¹⁴ Cf. A. O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York, 1955) No. VII, "The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism," 99-135. Professor H. G. Creel has drawn my attention to this study.